

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 NEA-10 ISO-00 CIAE-00 COME-00 EB-07 INR-07
LAB-04 NSAE-00 SIL-01 PA-01 PRS-01 USIA-06 /050 W
-----107127 090338Z /66

R 081303Z JUL 77
FM AMEMBASSY VALLETTA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 7505
INFO AMEMBASSY BRUSSELS
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMEMBASSY PARIS
AMEMBASSY ROME
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI

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USEEC

E.O. 11652: N/A
TAGS: ELAB, MT
SUBJECT: MINTOFF TAKES ON THE TRADE UNIONS

REF: A. VALLETTA 0640, B. 76 VALLETTA A-2,

1. SUMMARY: REACTING TO A SERIES OF GOM MOVES TO EMASCULATE THEIR AUTHORITY, MEMBER UNIONS OF THE CONFEDERATION OF MALTA TRADE UNIONS (CMTU) HAVE UNDERTAKEN A SERIES OF STRIKES IN RECENT WEEKS. THE GOM, SUPPORTED BY ITS POLITICAL PARTNER, THE RIVAL GENERAL WORKERS' UNION, HAS RESPONDED BY ADOPTING A HARD-LINE, NO COMPROMISE POSITION. THE SITUATION IS BUILDING TOWARD A SHOWDOWN WHICH THREATENS THE EXISTENCE OF THE FREE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IN MALTA. ALTERNATIVELY, SHOULD THE GOM BE FORCED TO BACK DOWN, PRIME MINISTER MINTOFF'S PRESTIGE COULD BE GREATLY TARNISHED. END SUMMARY

2. FOLLOWING A SERIES OF RECENT MOVES BY THE GOM TO
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RESTRICT THEIR AUTHORITY, VARIOUS MEMBER UNIONS OF THE CONFEDERATION OF MALTA TRADE UNIONS (CMTU) HAVE TAKEN ACTION TO PROTECT THEIR INTERESTS. THE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION OF MALTA WAS THE FIRST UNION TO STRIKE (PROVIDING ONLY EMERGENCY SERVICES). THE GOM RESPONDED BY IMPOSING A COMPLETE LOCK OUT OF THE DOCTORS FROM GOVERNMENT HOSPITALS. FOREIGN DOCTORS, MAINLY FROM ARAB AND EASTERN EUROPEAN

COUNTRIES, HAVE BEEN BROUGHT IN BY THE GOM TO PROVIDE MINIMUM MEDICAL SERVICES. THE DOCTOR'S STRIKE IS NOW NEARLY A MONTH OLD WITH NO END IN SIGHT (REFTEL A).

2. WITHIN THE PAST WEEK, ACTION TO PRESERVE THEIR ORGANIZATIONAL INTEGRITY ALSO HAS BEEN INITIATED BY THE MALTA GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES UNION, THE MALTA UNION OF BANK EMPLOYEES, AND THE MALTA UNION OF NURSES, ALL MEMBER UNIONS OF THE CMTU. THE LABOR PARTY GOVERNMENT HAS TAKEN A HARD LINE IN EVERY CASE, SUSPENDING UNION MEMBERS WHO FOLLOW UNION DIRECTIVES, AND CONDEMNING THEM AS "ENEMIES OF PROGRESS" AND AS "REACTIONARY FORCES WORKING AGAINST THE INTERESTS OF THE MALTESE WORKERS".

3. REFUTING NATIONALIST PARTY CHARGES IN PARLIAMENT THAT THE GOM ATTITUDE AMOUNTED TO A "DENIAL OF THE RIGHT TO STRIKE" AND A "THREAT TO THE EXISTENCE OF THE FREE TRADE UNIONS IN THE COUNTRY", PRIME MINISTER MINTOFF CALLED THE CMTU ACTIONS "ANTI-GOVERNMENT INCITEMENT." DURING A STORMY PARLIAMENTARY SESSION, HE ANNOUNCED THAT "THEY MIGHT AS WELL STAY OUT ON STRIKE UNTIL THE FINAL JUDGMENT", BECAUSE "WE HAVE A PEOPLE'S MANDATE AND NOBODY IS GOING TO STOP US".

4. THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL OF THE GENERAL WORKERS UNION, THE BACKBONE OF THE RULING MALTA LABOR PARTY, IS SUPPORTING LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THE GOM'S INTRANSIGENT POSITION AGAINST THE OTHER UNIONS.

5. DURING THE PAST SIX YEARS, VIRTUALLY EVERY CONTROVERSY IN MALTA REGARDLESS OF THE ISSUE, HAS SPLIT ALONG STRICTLY PARTY LINES. IF ONE IS NOT FOR THE GOM, HE IS LABELED AN "ANTI-GOVERNMENT REACTIONARY WHO OPPOSES THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE." SO IT IS IN THIS CASE. TO DATE, THE GOM HAS MANAGED TO ACHIEVE THE UPPER HAND IN EVERY INSTANCE, AND THE CMTU IS ABOUT THE LAST REMAINING ORGANIZATION CAPABLE OF MUSTERING ANY UNIFIED OPPOSITION TO GOM POLICIES. WHETHER OR NOT MINTOFF HAS CHOSEN THIS OCCASION TO BREAK THE POWER OF THE CMTU REMAINS TO BE SEEN; CERTAINLY AT THE MOMENT HE SHOWS NO INCLINATION TO NEGOTIATE A COMPROMISE. THE SITUATION IS VIEWED BY THE OPPOSITION NATIONALIST PARTY AS GRAVE, AND IT HAS TABLED A NO-CONFIDENCE MOTION AGAINST MINTOFF'S GOVERNMENT IN PARLIAMENT.

6. THE STRIKE BY BANK EMPLOYEES, THE MOST CRITICAL, IS BEGINNING TO AFFECT THE CONDUCT OF NORMAL BUSINESS OPERATIONS. IT COULD GENERATE CONSIDERABLE PRESSURE ON THE GOM IF ALLOWED TO GO ON FOR ANY TIME.

7. COMMENT: THE CMTU REPRESENTS APPROXIMATELY 10,000 MEMBERS, WHILE THE GWU HAS ABOUT 28,000 MEMBERS. IN THE PAST, THE CMTU HAS NOT BEEN AS ACTIVE OR AS WELL ORGANIZED AS THE LATTER. IT IS DOUBTFUL IF THE CMTU IS FINANCIALLY STRONG ENOUGH TO HOLD OUT INDEFINITELY AGAINST MINTOFF'S GOVERNMENT. WIGGINS

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: LABOR UNIONS, LABOR STRIKES
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Sent Date: 08-Jul-1977 12:00:00 am
Decaption Date: 01-Jan-1960 12:00:00 am
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1977VALLET00779
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D770244-0366
Format: TEL
From: VALLETTA
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1977/newtext/t19770775/aaaacnme.tel
Line Count: 122
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 87978a6e-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION EUR
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 77 VALLETTA 640, 76 VALLETTA A-2
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 07-Mar-2005 12:00:00 am
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 1915079
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: MINTOFF TAKES ON THE TRADE UNIONS
TAGS: ELAB, MT, (MINTOFF, DOMINIC)
To: STATE USEEC
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/87978a6e-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009